

The Bulgarian Ethnic Model: “Secular” Religion, Denominational Admissibility and Territorial Tolerance

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Received: 21 October 2024 ▪ Revised: 15 December 2024 ▪ Accepted: 30 December 2024

Abstract

The so-called The Bulgarian ethnic model is a Bulgarian political philosophy that presents itself as a formula that theorizes the ethno-religious balance in the post-communist society. The paradigm was created immediately after the fall of the regime of the communist dictator Todor Zhivkov and became matter of a fierce discussion of often contradictory opinions. The promoter of the mentioned particular matrix was the emerging post-communist and pro-democracy academic Bulgarian community with their professional invention, not the politicians. The latter rather hindered the public dialogue, being dominant supporters of the various tendencies of the remnants of nationalism. It reflects not only a specific stage of the country's political development, but also the economic, social and folk-psychological momentum of the local society. Three main factors determine the specificity of the ethno-religious tolerance of the Bulgarian society. In the first place, it is the presence of de facto content oxymoron “secular religion” in the society at the expense of practically zero indoctrination of the religious practices. It is about the irreversible erosion of the public authority of the Christian and Muslim clergy. In the second place, we can note the wonderful stitching of the most statesmanlike, secular Christian denomination – Eastern Orthodoxy and the most tolerant Islamic orthodox school – Hanafi Sunnism. It is about a kind of interreligious harmony. Thirdly, the successful sustainability of the Bulgarian ethno-confessional balance is due to the so-called positional tolerance, relating it to the geographical distribution between the different religious groups.

Keywords: Bulgarian Ethnic Model (BEM), secular religion, denominational admissibility, territorial tolerance.

The collapse of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria in 1989 came as a result of both the objective socio-economic collapse and the absence of the “underpinning” provided by the already collapsing USSR. Our country was probably the only member of the former socialist bloc in Eastern Europe to have entered the new post-communist era featuring strong internal political tensions of ethno-confessional nature. The collective crime of the communist rulers against the Bulgarian Islamic community, the so-called “Revival Process,” eroded the foundations of the communist regime. There were approximately 360,000 Bulgarian citizens who had been ousted from the country and the effect of this triggered a grave economic and political quake, which in turn laid the groundwork for some utterly dire conditions while searching for an appropriate formula of the democratic state-constituting process.¹

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Firstly, Bulgaria was to recover from its foreign-policy isolation abroad, and, secondly, it was to look for an acceptable constitutional formula for the disturbed ethno-confessional balance. There were a number of factors that helped Bulgaria recover and become an example of how to come to internal harmony between individual religious and ethnic groups, after a period of more than 35 years of ethno-confessional tensions and after having closed the shameful page of this antagonism. The “therapy” began immediately after the state declared the “Revival Process” a crime. The long process went through several stages, but it probably ended with the unprecedented election of former GERB MP Vezhdi Rashidov, an ethnic Turk, as the Speaker of the 48th National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria.ⁱⁱ

In the 1990s, Bulgarian politicians, but mostly scientists, brought to the fore the formula of the so-called “Bulgarian Ethnic Model” (BEM). BEM was to outline the way to overcome the cataclysms, give the arguments and theorise the features of harmonisation between the individual groups. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) tried to monopolise the dividends yielded from the already achieved stabilisation of the country. Their party leadership stated: “...Bulgaria became the only country on the Balkans that made a peaceful transition from communism to democracy. The Bulgarian ethnic model (BEM), the architect of which was Dr. Ahmed Dogan, is based on tolerance and togetherness and became the only convertible political product of Bulgaria. BEM was the necessary and mandatory condition for Bulgaria’s membership in NATO and the EU. We can also see it today in the attitude of Bulgaria as a part of the EU towards the other candidates for EU membership.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Quite rightly, both politicians and scientists and public figures rejected such claims. The debate about the genesis of BEM began in the 1990s and saw its active continuation throughout the first decade of the 21st century. Experts with often mutually exclusive opinions such as Antonina Zhelyazkova, Mihail Ivanov, Evgenia Ivanova, Tsvetana Georgieva, Petar-Emil Mitev, Nikolay Tilkidzhiev, Maksim Mizov, Sonia Siromakhova and many others actively participated in it. In an interview of hers, the expert Sonya Siromakhova summarised very well the foundation of the controversial ethno-religious matrix. She said: “Always and everywhere, the ethno-religious model is above all the result of the efforts, the mentality, the character of the main, state-forming ethnic group. In Bulgaria, this is the Bulgarian ethnic group. If this ethnic group is tolerant, then we tolerate – and the Bulgarian ethno-religious model is created. If it is intolerant, if it is chauvinistic, it gives birth to odious persons. Of course, along with the exceptional role of the Bulgarian ethnic group as an integrator, consolidator, and gatherer of our country, we cannot but acknowledge it to one degree or another (albeit a much smaller degree) to the rest of the ethnic groups in our country: to the Bulgarian Turks, the Bulgarian Armenians, the Bulgarian Jews, the Bulgarian Roma, etc. But by no means should we think that the Bulgarian ethno-religious model is the main and only merit of any minority ethnic group, let alone any party like the DPS. An even bigger mistake, verging on a crime, is to consider that the Bulgarian ethno-religious model is the merit of Ahmed Dogan <...> it is a function, a consequence and a result of this model. Only thanks to this model of ours, Ahmed Dogan was able to create his party.”^{iv}

The first factor influencing the transformation of Bulgaria into a model of a successful concert of individual faiths is the specificity of the strength of the religious feeling of the Bulgarian people. According to a Gallup International Balkan survey in 2022, only 53% of respondents declared themselves religious. This is the lowest level among all other Balkan nations. At the beginning of 2024, the same sociological agency came to the conclusion that only 43% have confidence in the Church, 30.6% – in the new Patriarch Daniil, and the downward trend is completed by the share of people who frequently attend services – 19.7 %.^v All this proves that religion in Bulgaria does not play the same role in society as it does in the neighbouring Balkan societies. Secularism has taken deep roots, which directly affects the genesis of the State. At the same time, neither the religious institutions nor the clergy would have the authority that can set any (positive or negative) significant political trend. Alongside with this, the absence of any

imperial tradition of the state-forming process (unlike the former Yugoslavia) stimulated the easy overcoming of the consequences of the “Revival Process” and boosted the achievement of the sought-after ethno-religious balance. The creation of a specific “secular” religious matrix in our country would probably be also due to the specificity of Bulgarian communism and, in particular, to the aspirations of the former regime to discredit the local clergy (be it Christian or Muslim), with the presumption of the complete eradication or at least the marginalisation of the religious ingredients of social mores and customs. To some extent, this would explain the reason why Bulgarian citizens who were manipulated into joining Islamist terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS could be counted on one hand.

The second factor for the construction of the harmonious chorus of the individual ethno-confessional communities would be a peculiar kind of permissibility between the individual dominant denominations in the two large families, the Christian and the Islamic. In 2021, followers of Eastern Orthodoxy and the Sunni (Hanafi) variant would make about 75% of the country’s population. The remaining minority groups (Catholics, Protestants, Armenians, Jews, Shiites and others) came to about 0.1%, as the trend of the “undecided” perceived as atheists is constantly increasing.^{vi} The history and creation of states whose population mainly professes precisely these two major denominational trends proves that the hybrid statist construction in question has the most stable parameters, due to similar state-forming philosophies. The tolerance between the two denominations is defined by their genesis. For example, Eastern Orthodoxy is perceived by Muslims as the “authentic” Christianity, from which Catholicism separated in the 11th century. Not coincidentally, in the same 11th century, Saladin, who spearheaded the conquest of the Crusaders, ordered the destruction of all Catholic cathedrals in Jerusalem, and that the Eastern Orthodox (Armenian) churches be left behind. This peaceful coexistence is facilitated by the fact that all four autocephalous Orthodox churches (the Ecumenical, Jerusalem, Alexandrian and Antiochian) are located in territories populated mainly by Sunni Muslims. On the other hand, the Sunni Hanafi school of jurisprudence is perceived as the most tolerant, *ar rai*, relaying on the opinion in the law-enforcement process, which, to some extent, brings it closer (if compared to the other three Sunni and Shia schools) to the Roman legal system, based on the principles of human *ratio*, i.e., reason. There is truth in the assumption that the Hanafi school is practically a kind of syncretic legal thought that abrogated the Eastern (Arabic and Persian traditions in jurisprudence) and infiltrated it with many European legal components.^{vii} A good proof in this regard was the attempt at reforms in the 19th century’s Ottoman State, which entirely based its legislation on the school in question and subsequently named it as the dominant philosophy to the Islamic minorities across the Balkan Peninsula, including those in Bulgaria. Overall, if we were to summarise the profile of dogmatic reciprocity, Muslims perceive Eastern Orthodoxy as the “original” Christianity, and conversely, Christian legal experts are of the opinion that Hanafiism is the “most rational” Islamic jurisprudential system.

The third factor contributing to a well-functioning BEM is of a purely functional nature. In Bulgaria, tolerance is positional. The two large communities do live side by side, however in separate regions, districts and municipalities. This is how the so-called “mixed areas”, where the Islamic and Christian communities switch places, are produced. Examples of this would be such areas as North-Eastern and South-Eastern Bulgaria, with Muslims being the dominant religion, and Turks being the leading ethnic group. And those are the areas where the DPS, which claims to protect the rights and freedoms of the Islamic minority, is in full or partial control of the local governments. The joint successful regional positional coexistence in Bulgaria has even become an attractive model for the activists of separate pro-Kurdish formations in neighbouring Turkey. Thus, in 2002, the leadership of the now defunct Rights and Freedoms Party, calling for a Turkish Federal State, came out with a message stating they would like their formation to govern regions with a predominantly Kurdish population, as the DPS governs its regions in Bulgaria.

BEM is a successful formula of fulfilled social harmony based on meaningful ethno-confessional characteristics and sustainable parameters of the Bulgarian post-communist political culture. The Bulgarian population's folk psychology managed to overcome the internal political adventures of the former totalitarian state, creating a matrix based on understanding, mutual penetration and, above all, tolerance with the clear awareness that Bulgaria is a common home for representatives of all ethnicities and religions inhabiting the lands of the country.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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